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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a discussion of events within national sport organizations that have recently addressed the problem of homophobia in sports; in particular, the social, professional, and political harassment of lesbian women who are career athletes. A brief overview is given of the stance of feminists, both liberal humanist and radical, on the subject of the civil rights of lesbians in sports. The policy decisions and actions of four sport organizations on this topic are reviewed: (1) the Women's Sports Foundation; (2) the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport (CAAWS); (3) the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD); and (4) the Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation (CAHPER). Particular focus is upon CAAWS, a feminist advocacy organization, which has assumed the lead in social and political action. It is noted that public discussions of homophobia in sport represent an important step towards politicizing lesbian issues among nonpolitical and closeted lesbians and among heterosexual women and men. (JD)

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Combatting homophobia in sport and physical education: academic and professional responsibilities

In recent years, at least four national sports organizations in Canada and the US have addressed the issue of homophobia for the first time at their annual conferences: the Women's Sports Foundation in 1984; the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport (CAAWS) in 1985 and 1986; the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD) in 1987; and the Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation (CAHPER) in 1988. This year, NASSS joins their ranks in presenting its first session on homophobia.

The origin of this NASSS session is itself interesting. The preliminary call for papers listed a session on "Social deviance and sport" and identified drug use and homophobia as two understudied topics that would be given special consideration. Undeterred by the allusion to "deviance," I submitted a proposal; it was obvious that the "deviants" were the homophobes, and not the lesbians in sport. Two separate sessions were finally organized, on drugs and homophobia.

British feminist Celia Kitzinger provides a theoretical framework for a discussion of homophobia and the social construction of lesbianism. Since this paper will focus on homophobia directed at lesbians in sport, Kitzinger's insights are particularly relevant. In an incisive critique of liberal humanism, she shows how this approach renders lesbianism a private and personal matter - nothing more than a 'sexual preference' - and thus removes it from the political domain.

Kitzinger identifies psychology, in particular, as a major liberal humanist force in the social control of lesbians: historically, the pathologizing of same-sex relationships served this purpose, whereas today lesbian subjectivities are regulated, and therapy aims at individual psychological adjustment, rather than system change. One convincing example comes from the hierarchical model of lesbian/gay identity, popular in some psychological circles. The radical political identity, predictably labelled "strident" and "rebellious," is represented as the second last stage, followed by the most "mature" stage in which "integration" is achieved. Therefore, at the risk of being seen as strident and rebellious, I will identify myself as a radical feminist and lesbian.

In her analysis of lesbians' identity accounts, Kitzinger used the two broad categories of 'liberal humanist' and 'radical feminist'. In terms of lesbian politics, she noted that the liberal humanist account, characterised by the absence of political consciousness or action, undermines the "radical feminist claims for lesbianism as a major political force" and is therefore "politically inexpedient from a radical feminist perspective." (Kitzinger, 1987; 93).

In a less sophisticated but equally provocative work on the history of lesbian softball in the US, Yvonne Zipter proposed two similar categories within lesbian communities: the jocks and the feminists (Zipter, 1988). The apolitical views of the jocks in Zipter's research reflect liberal humanist ideology, and the rifts between the two groups in the context of softball are particularly graphic. For the purpose of this discussion, I will

add a third category of liberal feminism, which recognizes the need for political awareness and action on issues such as sex equity in sport, but fails to analyse the links between female sexualities and women's oppression.

Kitzinger's research illustrated the pervasiveness of liberal humanist notions of lesbianism as private and personal; many lesbians, as well as many heterosexuals, agreed with such statements as "lesbianism is a private thing; what people do in bed is their own business." And, as she pointed out, homophobia scales often use agreement with this "private and personal" stance, and with the view that "gays are just the same as straights," as evidence of tolerance, when in reality this view fails to recognize the specific oppressions faced by lesbians and gays, and is therefore homophobic. Conversely, heterosexuals who agree that lesbianism is "a blow against patriarchy" and "a threat to the nuclear family" may be ranked as homophobic on some scales, when they are in fact showing that they understand the radical politics of lesbianism; furthermore, most radical lesbians agree with these statements.

Although Kitzinger avoids making this judgement, it seems fair to say that lesbians who adhere to the liberal humanist position reveal some internalized homophobia - an understandable response, of course, to the profoundly anti-woman and anti-lesbian climate in which we live. Liberal humanism reinforces the "private and personal" stance among both lesbians and nonlesbians: individuals who believe that the way we expresses our sexuality is no more significant than the way brush our

teeth, are labelled "mature", "integrated" and tolerant. Lesbian invisibility and homophobia are perpetuated by this perspective.

The impact of homophobia on lesbians and nonlesbians in sport and physical education, and the various ways in which women and men in national sports organizations have addressed these issues, can be usefully analysed in terms of the three categories of liberal humanist, liberal feminist and radical feminist. This is not to suggest that liberal humanism is the primary force animating white heterosexual males who wield power in sport and physical education circles. Indeed, as we will see, it is only the progressive women and men who adopt a liberal humanist, or sometimes a liberal feminist position; many of the males in power are simply, blatantly misogynist and homophobic.

There is ample evidence that such attitudes and practices produce doubly oppressive conditions for lesbians in sport - evidence that administrators make hiring and firing decisions based on women's sexual orientation, and that the poisoned work environment forces some lesbians to quit their jobs or abandon their hopes of athletic careers (see, for example, Potera and Kort, 1986; "Former basketball coach ...," 1983, Baxter, 1987; Kort, 1982; Sabo, 1987). Incidents of sexual harassment and overt discrimination against lesbians have been documented in school and university sport contexts, as well as in community recreation. Many women are leading closeted lives as sport administrators, coaches, physical educators and athletes, in order to survive professionally and personally (Baxter, 1983, 1987; Goldstein, 1983; Kidd, 1983; ni Cobhan, 1982; Zipter, 1988). Understandably, like many women in male-dominated

workplaces, they see feminist political activities as threats to the fragile coping mechanisms that they have developed over the years to deal with male hostility and general homophobia (Sherlock, 1983; MacIntyre, 1988; Zipter, 1988).

Unfortunately, the silence and invisibility of closeted lesbians serves homophobic interests very well, by dividing women, including feminists, in situations where solidarity is essential. Therefore, heterosexual women and men, from their position of relative privilege, have a responsibility to challenge the homophobia that silences and immobilizes many lesbians, and it is heartening to see that some of the initiatives within sports organizations have come from nonlesbians.

Lesbians whose jobs involve school-age children - for example, physical education teachers - are particularly vulnerable to homophobia. The myth that lesbians and gays "recruit" and "proselytize" from among the ranks of the young continues to be propagated in right wing circles, despite the overwhelming evidence that the major perpetrators of child sexual abuse are heterosexual men whose targets are young girls (Russell, 1984). (On this topic, it was recently reported that a man who was responsible for children's community recreation programs in a small Minnesota town had sexually abused almost every child in that community (Coleman, 1988)).

Investigation of sexual harassment and abuse of female athletes by male coaches is urgently needed, in view of the growing numbers of women who report that unwanted, often

coercive, sexual attention is so commonplace that it is seen as 'normal' male behaviour for coaches; in such situations, the young lesbian athlete may rightly fear that her rejection of the coach's advances will betray her sexual identity.

Given this daily reality, the individualised liberal humanist 'solution' that depolitizes lesbianism and relegates it to the private realm is all the more appealing to many women. This conspiracy of silence relieves lesbians of the need to come out to their colleagues or peers, while it reassures nonlesbians that their discomfort at such 'personal' disclosures is justified; after all, so the argument goes, sexuality is a private matter. In this scenario, no one has to confront the political implications of women's primary emotional and sexual allegiance to one another, the kind of woman-identification that lesbian poet Elsa Gidlow explained in her inimitable way: "In a land of oranges, I am faithful to apples."

In a discussion of bonding among women in sport, Park et al. (1987) claim that "whether or not this allegiance asserts itself in physical sexual expression between women is not the real issue. The allegiance itself is intolerable in a society which reserves the allegiance of women for men." This explanation of male hostility, although valid as far as it goes, tends to minimize the impact of sexual practice on sexual politics. Whatever the depth of such bonding, it is the lesbians, more than the "credentialled" heterosexual women (to use Pat Griffin's term) who pose the greatest threat to male heterosexual hegemony. For example, it is not coincidental that judges have awarded child custody to known lesbians on the condition that they are

not sexually active. From the radical feminist standpoint, freedom of sexual expression is one of the real issues.

I will now turn to events within national sports organizations that have recently addressed the homophobia problem. I will focus on CAAWS, using my observations as an executive member and an active participant since 1982; some brief comments on events in the other organizations will also be provided. It should be noted here that Pat Griffin has been working for many years on these issues, and has several publications presenting valuable strategies to deal with homophobia in sport-related settings (Griffin, 1984, 1987, 1989).

CAAWS is a feminist advocacy organization established in 1981, and its first panel discussion on sexuality and sport took place at the 1985 conference. Of the four panelists, two were lesbian and two nonlesbian, and there was an audience of approximately 60 women, that is, more than half the conference participants. Several women provided political interpretations of the issue, stressing the importance of solidarity and the need to recognize that the sport/sexuality/power connection has repercussions for all women in sport. The following resolutions were passed: "that CAAWS endorse the inclusion of sexual orientation in the Canadian Human Rights Charter"; and "that discussion papers on sport, gender and sexuality be brought to the 1986 Annual General Meeting." Hence, although the discussion reflected some awareness of the radical implications of lesbianism, the resolutions focused on human rights and education, both liberal feminist agendas.

The 1985 workshop was one outcome of an earlier CAAWS planning meeting, where past and present board members had discussed the homophobia issue, as well as something termed "The Image Problem" that had been identified in a membership survey. It was clear that many women, lesbians included, found it easier to deal with the so-called image problem (tacitly understood to be the image of CAAWS as a predominantly lesbian organization) than to say, or even to hear, the word 'lesbian'. (As Pat Griffin appropriately asked in her homophobia checklist, "Are the words 'lesbian' and 'gay' only spoken in a whisper or behind closed doors [in your organization]?" (Griffin, 1984)).

There had been a four-year silence on the homophobia issue in CAAWS, broken only by informal complaints that lesbians were becoming too visible in the organization, and that "good women" (presumably heterosexual and/or homophobic) had been "lost" as a result. But, as I noted in a 1986 article in the CAAWS newsletter, no one asked if CAAWS had lost other "good women" (who happened to be lesbian) because of its failure to deal with the issue of homophobia among members. Such divisiveness in a feminist organization took its toll in women's time and energy, and the open discussion of homophobia represented a step towards greater solidarity and political effectiveness.

At the 1986 conference, a workshop titled "Out of the Closets" was attended by about 20 women, representing about one third of participants. A resolution was produced, stating that CAAWS "is opposed to discrimination against lesbians in sport and physical activity; and that CAAW&S undertakes to support advocacy efforts to ensure lesbian equality of rights." Like the 1985

resolutions, this represented a predominantly human rights analysis of the problem - again a liberal feminist view - but it was welcomed by most lesbians as evidence of the gradual politicising of lesbian issues. The reference to advocacy, too, suggested growing awareness of heterosexual women's responsibilities on this issue.

In the last three years, homophobia has been only a secondary concern within CAAWS. Lobbying efforts urging all provincial governments to formulate women's sport policies have demanded most of the executive's time and energy, and it appears that some of the rifts between lesbian and nonlesbian members have been mended. Apart from an article on homophobia that I was asked to write for the newsletter last year, silence again prevails on the question of lesbian visibility (Lenskyj, 1988).

To some extent, the state has played a part in enforcing this silence: in 1987, the Secretary of State Women's Program, a federal government source of funding for CAAWS conferences, excluded groups whose primary purpose was "to promote a view on sexual orientation." Although this was never CAAWS's primary purpose, there has been ongoing debate about the implications for one-time-only lesbian initiatives or for groups that are, like CAAWS, unequivocally lesbian-positive.

There are interesting parallels between the CAAWS experience in 1985-86 and some events at the Women's Sports Foundation's first New Agenda Conference in 1984. The conference was widely covered in the feminist and mainstream media and is probably familiar to most sport scholars. One workshop, reported in the

Washington radical feminist newspaper, Off our backs, is of particular interest: the topic was "cross-sex identification" but the discussion turned to homophobia in women's athletics and participants produced a resolution in support of lesbians. However, as the Off our backs journalist observed, "The women in the workshop ... saw lesbianism as something they did in private... Why should people discriminate against me on the basis of what I do at home? seemed to be the question at hand. It seemed so clearly unfair, and people should be educated about how unfair it is... The women did not see lesbianism as having anything to do with politics, didn't see how anyone could find it threaten g." This classic liberal humanist view was also apparent when the same women voted in favour of a pro-lesbian resolution, but against one supporting feminist research and scholarship on sport and gender issues.

Returning to the Canadian context, at the 1988 CAHPER conference on equity, Pat Griffin presented a paper on homophobia in physical education, which was subsequently published in the CAHPER Journal's special equity issue. One of the conference's five equity-related resolutions stated "that homophobia be recognized as an equity issue in physical education and that opportunities to discuss the ramifications of homophobia in physical education be promoted." Nine action proposals dealt with some common liberal feminist themes: educating and sensitizing physical education professionals to the impact of homophobia on equity issues, and establishing non-homophobic hiring practices. One action recommended developing advocates among CAHPER staff and members, a potentially political step that

could shift some responsibility to heterosexual women and men. Unfortunately, the word 'lesbian' failed to appear in any of the CAHPER recommendations, and gender-neutral language was used throughout.

Finally, a few comments about the 1987 convention of AAHPERD, at which a session on "Homophobia and physical education in sport: issues in conducting controversial research" was inauspiciously assigned the last timesiot on the last day: the predominantly female audience was estimated at about 300, a clear indication of the timeliness of the topic in physical education circles; four papers, presented by two women and two men, received a very positive response.

Having indicated the shortcomings of liberal humanist and liberal feminist perspectives, let us now consider some radical feminist alternatives. It is not necessary to explain the political significance of language and the power of naming women's experience. Yet there seems to be some reluctance to talk about <u>lesbians</u> in sport if meaning can be conveyed by some other terminology. While it is certainly preferable to refer to "the homophobia issue" rather than "the lesbian issue," there are many occasions when accuracy, visibility and politics demand explicitness about lesbians and lesbianism. Gender neutral language may falsely suggest that there are no lesbians in sport; that there are equal numbers of gay men and lesbians in sport; that homophobia has the same repercussions for gay men as for lesbians; or that sex discrimination and sexual harassment/abuse have the same effects on lesbian and heterosexual women.

Less obvious language traps involve terms such as sex-role orientation, femininity and masculinity, which frequently mask homophobic and heterosexist assumptions in the conceptualization and methodology used in research on women in sport. Heterosexist bias is blatant in some research instruments, for example, personality scales that list "kissing a person of the opposite sex" as evidence of 'normal' social adjustment (e.g. Edwards, 1959, cited in Gravelle et al. 1982). And, as radical feminists have been arguing recently (Lenskyj, 1986; Zipter, 1988), the terms 'feminine' and 'heterosexual' are often used interchangably, as are the terms 'masculine' and 'lesbian'. Validation for these homophobic innuendos is not difficult to find in the scholarly literature: countless studies pose the hypothesis that women in team sports, or nontraditional sports, or sport administration, are more 'masculine' than women in individual or aesthetic sports, or women in traditional jobs. Feminist critiques of such research, dating back as far as 1973 (Gerber, 1973, cited in Hall, 1981) have for the most part been ignored. It is time for sport scholars not only to listen to this critique and to curtail their own fruitless investigations into female athletes' masculinity/femininity quotients, but also to convey to their students that such research is both misguided and dangerous.

Public discussions of homophobia in sport represent an important step towards politicizing lesbian issues among non-political and closeted lesbians, and, equally important, among heterosexual women and men. The specific kinds of oppression faced by lesbians in sport should be named and challenged, and the existence of lesbians in sport acknowledged and celebrated.

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